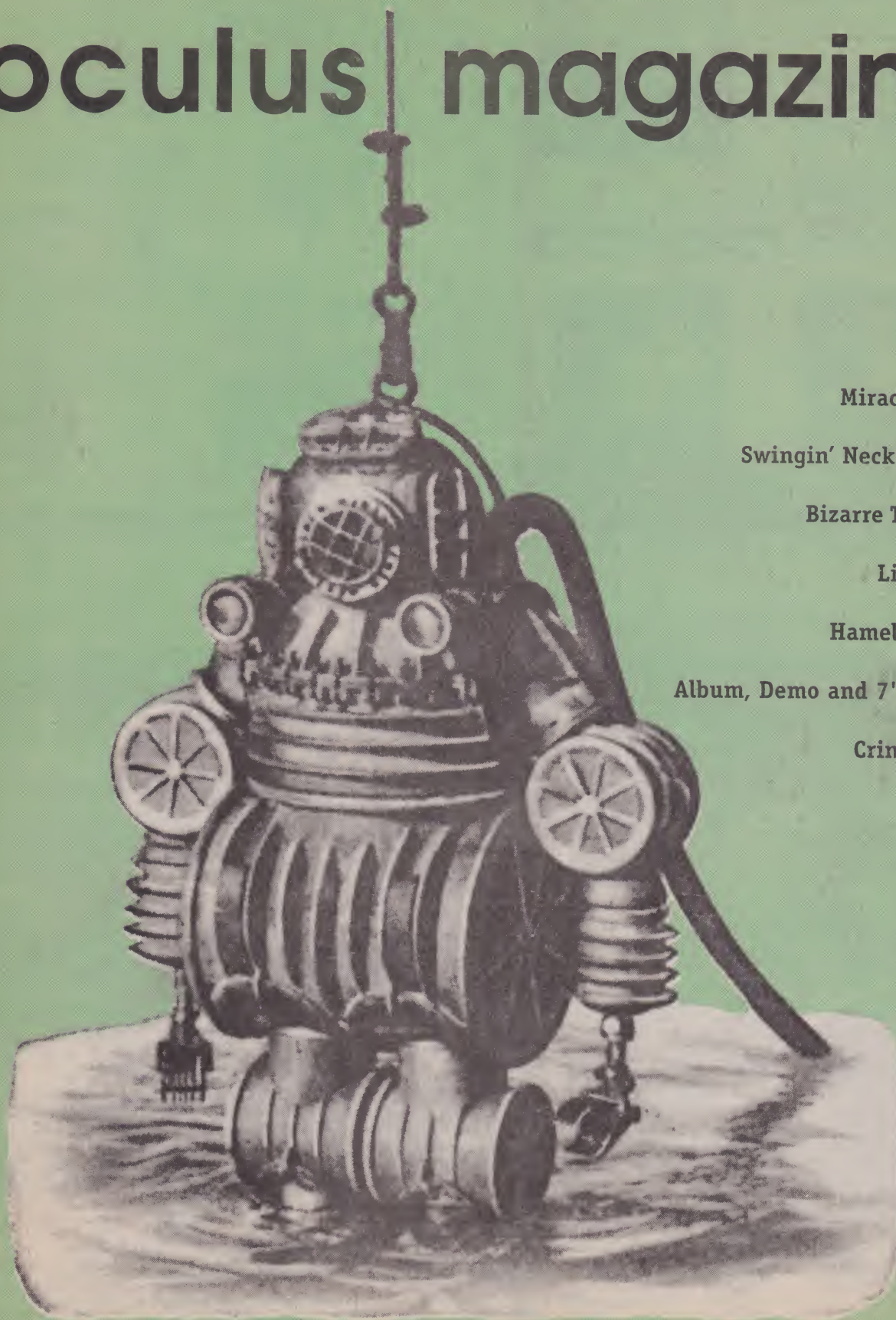


DECEMBER 1997/JANUARY 1998 NO 6.6

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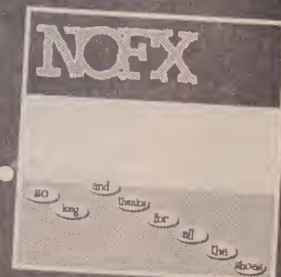
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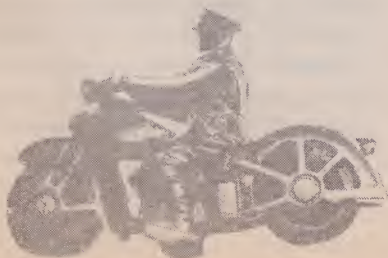
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4, *Universal Warmth* (Headhunter)

Let's hear it for the Big Riff, the large, dumb, distorted guitar that is connected, via satellite, to the entire back catalogs of Blue Cheer, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and the Cromagnon Club and Boulder Philharmonic. Most of the songs on *Universal Warmth* are predicated on variations of that riff, as obvious as a dismembered dog's paw in a glass of lemonade. As much fun as all this monster rock can be at times, it tires quickly, probably from too many blows on its own head. Occasionally poking its head out of this primordial tar pit, however, is a band capable of heavy, restless, tense rockers. Vicious, concise slashers like "Start Again" and "Jail," with its irresistible drunken sailor refrain, "All my friends are in jail now," proves 4 could be one hell of a powerful unit, if they lost all their Helmet records.

-Jim Glauner

Aphex Twin, *Come To Daddy* (Warp/Sire)

Only Aphex Twin, aka Richard D. James, could start a record with "Come To Daddy, Pappy Mix," a track lampooning the combined schtick of Prodigy, Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson. Fuzz-toned electric guitar rips over wiggled-out percussion while a studio-altered growl repeats melodramatic, horror show lyrics. James' wink is implicit with the inclusion of printed lyrics: "I Want Your Soul, I Will Eat Your Soul. Repeat x 8. Aargh." But this joke's only funny the first time. Fortunately, James follows it with his usual electronic fare which, while routine for him, easily blows most other electronica off the keyboard—save that of his true pappies, Kraftwerk. For Aphex Twin neophytes, though, his last two records are better bets. Sure, tracks like "Flim" and "IZ-US" are downright gorgeous slices of wistful keyboard melodies garnished by intricate, lifelike percussion, strings and eldritch squawks and beeps. But look for those two on singles. Remixes and arcana, requiring the acquired taste of an initiated fan, comprise the rest of *Come to Daddy*.

-Andy Fenwick

Ashley Stove, *Into The Sun* (Jesus Christ)

No matter how competent the musician, there's something about arty, dissonant jazz-rock that just sounds like a jumbled glom, quickly becoming redundant. Adding lame vocals and cryptic lyrics ("Unify and meet me where the moon is four in the morning radio voices," from "Zoom Tac-

tics") doesn't help. This may be OK as background music. Lyrics are included and a recipe for black beans is printed on the CD.
-Robert Barry Francos

Bardo Pond, *Lapsed* (Matador)

Bardo Pond is a big ol' rawk band with a big ol' rawk sound, drenched in distortion, monolithic and immense. They combine a Northwest punk-metal rhythm section—long, slow metallic crawls through grimy major-minor chord changes—with an East Coast wash of muted melodic vocals, densely layered with feedback. The album's major drawback is its single-mindedly unvarying slow-to-mid tempo and the overall lack of distinction between songs. With a little variety and some more songcraft, these guys could be a band to watch.

-David Reitzes

The Bellbats, *The Bellbats* (Century)

Sometimes, male poetic sensitivity rots. Good thing The Bellbats manage to balance gloomy guitars and moody crooning with more traditional rock. On "Star," a sweeter Bellbats venture, a lonely, twangy guitar backing well-belted vocals about alienation significantly lowers the potential for self-loathing. A few tracks (but not nearly enough) offer female backing vocals, effectively filling out lyrics that tend to drown amid heavy drums and droning guitars. A little bit glum, a little bit rock 'n' roll, but more importantly, a lovely ride.

-Maria Raha

BMX Bandits, *Theme Park* (Big Deal)

The BMX Bandits have been around, in various incarnations, since the mid-80s. Former members of the BMX Bandits include current members of Teenage Fanclub and the Soup Dragons. *Theme Park* is full of perky and poppy tracks—"We're Gonna Shake You Down" and "I Wanna Fall In Love" are brief, blissed-out pop ditties that illustrate the fine line between solid pop hooks and boring, uninspired pop love songs. A 60s rock sensibility meshes well with the diverse musical talents of band members Douglas Stewart, Francis Macdonald, Sushil Dade, Lawrence Kim and Gabriel Telermin. Instruments used include a sitar, Moog and theremin. "Milky Way" is two minutes of lush instrumentation, while songs like "Nuclear" and "Motorboat" remind me of *California-Dreamin'* era Beach Boys.

Although I was impressed with the qual-

ity of this disc, I must confess that I found the lead singer's voice annoyingly bland and toneless at times. The sharing of vocals between band members helped on this point. All in all, a solid, infrequently great release that will probably fall short of the perfect 10 that these guys deserve for effort.

-brandi berry

The Bouncing Souls, *The Bouncing Souls*
(Epitaph)

The idea that a product becomes more artificial and impersonal the more it is reproduced apparently also holds true for music. The gleeful feeling I get with the acquisition of a shiny new Bouncing Souls album soon dissipates as song after song crank themselves listlessly through my speakers. The rhythmic, catchy punk of Bouncing Souls yore is gone, and the new album is...dare I say it?...tedious.

Almost every song fell flat on my ears; I don't think I'd be able to separate them from 100 other 30-minute albums I've heard. New listeners should see them live.

-Maria Raha

Brand New Unit, *Diddley Squat*
(Creative Man)

Classic hardcore punk. The singer, who is of course too occupied to do anything else, roars as fast as he can without regard to intelligibility because, hey, they have a lyric sheet. Which reveals that their songs are exclusively about people and things that annoy them. The one that dispenses older-brotherly advice is called "Thick Skull." Better than average because production and musicianship avoid that common blurry feel.

-David Schweitzer

The Brian Jonestown Massacre, *Give It Back!* (Bomp!/Tangible)

I can see why Bomp!'s Greg Shaw liked this group. Imagine Oasis if they were less serious about themselves and went for psychedelic pop rather than Beatles pop. The end result is a wall-of-sound mix that would probably have been on the charts in 1967, the year singer/songwriter/producer Anton Newcombe was born. Unfortunately, if I read my jacket covers correctly, Newcombe passed away this year, so get this release and enjoy the likes of "Malela," "Their Satanic Majesties' Second Request" (more like "Revolution 9, Part II") and the ironic "(You Better Love Me) Before I Am Gone" with Miranda Richards on vocals.

-Robert Barry Francos

Courtney Pine, *Underground* (Antilles)

This album features bebop, swing, and avant garde jazz primarily performed on sax and woodwinds (Courtney Pine) and keyboards (Cyrus Chestnut) with occasional guitar soloing (Mark Whitfield) and vocals (Jhelisa). DJ Pogo periodically intrudes with some unrelated vocal scratches that remind you of his presence and that this isn't just a jazz CD. The turntable work is not an integral part of the groove at all and becomes an awkward interruption. In the liner notes we find Courtney Pine insisting that a successful marriage of jazz and hip-hop is possible, but many have done it more successfully than Pine. The composition and soloing is not groundbreaking by any means, but Pine and the other musicians are quite adept players and are occasionally able to produce sounds expressive enough to allow one to forget the fuzzy Street Fighter samples, until another one comes along.

-Dan Ennis

Crazy Alice, *Hey Jimmy, Have A Great Summer* (Catapult)

Very few bands, let alone many of today's punk projects, could produce the perfect road trip album, but Crazy Alice proves itself worthy. *Hey Jimmy, Have a Great Summer* is polished enough never to irritate, pop enough to not induce brooding silences and contains the all-important pop-punk beats that induce embarrassing, convulsive dancing in one's seat.

Even the young, lilting sadness of lyrics such as the ones found on "I'm Out"—("It gets hard growing up/nothing works out/join the club,") are sculpted to sing-a-long material by melodic pop-guitar that eases the harsh, bare honesty of the lyrics.

Barring a strange bout with random heavy metal riffs near the end, the boys have learned the golden rule: For most of us, metal riffs and egotistical solos are far more fun to play than they are to hear. Their punk treads metal lightly, but they know the meaning of beating a dead horse—a lesson they could teach a few bands I know.

-Maria Raha

The Dinner is Ruined, *Elevator Music for Non-Claustrophobic People*
(Sonic Unyon)

Wanky little snippets of droning ambient dreariness and occasional half-formed song fragments, none of which, it must be admitted, suggest a complete lack of talent. This

is the sort of thing, however, that one trades on cassette through the mail with other producers of such esoterica. Asking people to pay actual cash for it may be a little presumptuous. It's not wholly uninteresting, but it's the type of recording that most anyone with a four-track, a guitar and a vacuum cleaner could approximate. Bonus points for the title, though.

-David Reitzes

A Don Piper Situation, *A Don Piper Situation* (Scrimshaw)

Don Piper's "situation" may be melancholy but it makes for some good songwriting on this new five-song ep. The songs are well written, full of hooks and presented originally. While straying from standard pop, he has embraced a more folksy acoustic sound. The ep opens with "Turn It On," a sad, slow, poetic song that turns the listener on with its hooks. "The Finger," has an interesting approach and is laden with wah wah guitar and toy piano. While "Start Again" and "Ray Falls Down" fall short, "Song For Joy" maintains this disc as something full of folk and flavor.

-Seth G. Nadel

Flowchart, *Cumulus Mood Twang*
(Carrot Top)

Cumulus Mood Twang is an excellent, hypnotically ambient cd à la the Orb, but without the pulsating bass lines and trippy effects of Dr. Alex Paterson and Co. "Another word explodes," "Rust à la Glare" and "Icicles and Clipboards" rise and fall like the progeny of some massive, electronic, tidal machine. "Yosho" starts out rather ominously, as does "Grain of apology," with a few pulsating, repeated minor chords, but the former transforms into a pious, organ-accented chant. Both relaxing and faintly disturbing, *Cumulus Mood Twang* is mood music for your daily devotions, whatever those may be.

-brandi berry

Frum the Hills, *Frum the Hills*
(Gas/Merkin)

Sounding more like a musical redneck drunken brawl than a studio session, these old ol' boys from "West By God Virginia" sure do know how to throw a party. With names like Evis T., Rev. Jefferson Davis Reed and Rockin' Toofless Bill Lippy, you can just feel the banjos, jugs, washboard,

jew's harp, stand up bass, can o' nails (ain't no lie), etc., that it took to make this rough-and-tumble hillbilly/bluegrass/southern rock/country/kitchen sink ramble. Evis, who "hollers the most," has a deep, gravelly, totally uncoordinated voice that fits the mood perfectly. While I get the impression tthy rehearsed little, they sound like they had a lot of fun doing this CD. The lyrics, fortunately included, mention *not* eating possums (other roadkill's OK, though), wrecking pickups, and begging, "Darlin', put away your gun." Highly recommended.

-Robert Barry Francos

Robert Gordon, Robert Gordon (Llist)
Greetins' and salutations, friends. Sho' hope y'all come on out and git yo'self a copy of mah latest LP, a fahn addition to anyone's collection of good ol' fashioned rockabilly jes' lak' Mama would've made iffin' only she wuz able. Poor Mama, when Ah thinks of all the tahms ...Wuzzat? Naw, Ah don't sound lak' half-cooked, leftover Johnny Cash, ya li'l tumbleweed-smokin' piece'a prairie poop! Ya'll jes' thinks Ah duz cuz ya got yer ears all messed up from the acid-house-drums-'n'-a-bass-discofied-grungy-rock y'all been soppin' up lak' it was gravy or sumpin. Ah's made darn near 700 albums of this fahn music, and Ah don't need sum snot-nosed, college-reared, glue-sniffin' li'l techno-raver lak' yew tellin' me wut's wut. Well, fahn then! Go 'head and buy them ol' Johnny Cash CDs instead! See if Ah care! Git yer Elvis Sun Sessions, too! Ah ain't gonna stop ya. Aw, spit. Don't yew kids wanna hear no new music?

-David Reitzes

KMFDM, Retro (WaxTrax/TVT)

Despite rumors to the contrary, the "industrial" music scene is still alive and kicking, thanks to long-time faves like KMFDM, Thrill Kill Kult and others. KMFDM's latest, *Retro*, proves there's still a place for ominous, pounding, turbulent music. "Megalomaniac" is an instant hit, with Sascha K. shouting, "In the age of super-boredom/hype and mediocrity/celebrate relentlessness/menace to society." "Leid Und Elend" and "Torture" both feature a delicate tripping keyboard riff over classic, relentless, electronic surge. "Stray Bullet" and "Down and Out" are a bit sludgy and overdone, but all in all, this disc should be well-appreciated by fans.

-brandi berry

King Sour, Instrumentally Retarded (Morphius)

Instrumentally Retarded is comprised of nine tracks of searing, rhythmically challenging free-form guitar-based instrumental rock from the Richmond, Va. based band King Sour. The opening two tracks, "Silverfish" and "Wet Paper Bag," nod their heads toward jangly guitar-pop territory, but without the usual and oftentimes annoying whiny frat-boy lyrics of most popular music. King Sour is supposedly part of a subgenre called "math rock," but they appear to refute this with a track called "Math Rock, My Ass."

Visions of stoner geeks listening to a lot of Rush dance in my head, but that's a trite and superficial observation. This is an interesting and somehow fresh, minimal, free-form sound that takes its cues as much from improvisational jazz as it does from Neil Young and King Crimson.

-brandi berry

Dayna Manning, Volume 1 (Netzwerk)

OK, here's the scoop: Dayna Manning is not Jewel, despite a slight facial resemblance. Dayna Manning is not Fiona Apple. Dayna Manning is not (insert your generic 18-20-year old female pop singer/songwriter/guitar player here). But there's only so much ground you can cover at this age. *Volume 1* is merely Manning's take on an oft-repeated tale: Girl meets boy at a tender age, girl falls in love, boy doesn't, boy fucks girl over, girl cries about it and then takes it out on her guitar. There are a lot of young artists like this around, and some of them, like Dayna Manning, were lucky enough to be signed.

Generics aside, *Volume 1* is a very good album in the vein of generic young female singer-songwriters. I won't go through hoops trying to describe her singing style—it's interesting, very effective and sounds somewhat like Tanya Donnelly, but without the annoying whiskey throat of Apple or the wispy, silly yodeling of Jewel. Songs like "Half the Man" and "Coincidence" show a talent for lyrics and harmonies that can only grow better with age. The album starts off quietly but strongly with the pretty, melancholy, simple twists of "Half the Man" and "And That Was Done," but "My Addiction," "Walk the Moon," "Under the Hill," and "Coincidence" show a strength that extends into more lushly orchestrated pieces. Mom and Dad Manning show up

on clarinet and, I believe, organ, showing that Dayna's talent is possibly genetic.

-brandi berry

The Lonesome Organist, *Collector of Cactus Echo Bags* (Thrill Jockey)

Collector of Cactus Echo Bags is comprised of 20 short tracks that range in style from cartoonish fantasy, to guitar and organ, to wailing discord, to breakbeat. All of the music on this CD is produced by one person on a large variety of instruments including a toy piano. The Lonesome Organist's singing is recorded well below the level of the instruments and when he isn't sarcastically crooning, he is usually shouting things like, "I want your leg," or "Oww!"

The songs share a hectic and slightly rushed quality which conveys a feeling of drive and intent in recording with perhaps a significant dementia. The Organist admits that this was intentional, and that he is indeed being a ham with a soft cuckoo clock backing his soulful cry, "Make me less lonesome tonight." This is impressively crafted, engaging music.

-Dan Ennis

The Lynnfield Pioneers, *Emerge* (Matador)

On *Emerge*, the Lynnfield Pioneers are raving garage rockers one minute, heavy, Stooges-influenced dirgemeisters the next.

While two repetitive guitars, discordant Moog and Farfisa, and Don Cook's Iggy-styled vocals provide most of the artillery for the trio's relentless frontal assault, it's kit basher J.P. Jones (who's almost certainly possessed by devils) who makes this collection a groove-y catharsis.

Particular tunes emerging from the din include "Bad Luck Baby," which shakes and shimmies, "Outside In," which sounds a whole lot like "Sister Ray" and "Lucite," which slows things down a bit until the Pioneers decide to fire it up again.

-David Salfino

The Lucys, *Anselmo* (Compulsiv Music)

Why do guy groups insist on naming themselves after women? After a bizarre few opening seconds, the CD settles in with a very nasal, yet decent, rock-based pop. From the best I can figure out, The Lucys is actually Jesse Jameson and some other people who join him here and there. I like the way the songs are of a personal nature, sometimes dealing with angst without en-

tering the mental morasses of the likes of an Alanis Morissette. Jameson's voice is distinctive and sincere, which helps make the songs work. The best cuts are the harmonious "A Time Ago," "Pilot," the solo "Somebody Sweet" and the powerful "Mary." The only thing his songs need is a really great hook to make them more memorable and keep them from running into one another. Anyway, I enjoyed this release.

-Robert Barry Francos

Mogwai, *Young Team* (Jetset)

To label Mogwai as "just another wall of sound band" would be too easy. While these Glaswegians have undoubtedly been influenced by Spaceman 3 and their offspring, Mogwai offer an updated spin on the last 10 years of feedback-laden pop music.

With the exception of a gloomy tune entitled "R U Still In 2 It?," Mogwai's second full-length effort, *Young Team*, is an instrumental release. Most tracks on *Young Team* begin with dreamy riffs that yield suddenly to layers of unrelenting feedback and then gently return to melancholy guitar work for a tidy close. A smattering of samples, such as an anxious one-sided conversation and a train embarking from an imaginary platform, further draw in the curious listener.

I found Mogwai's intertwined drones and manic swings powerful, yet soothing.

-Erik Hoffman

The Orange Peels, *Square* (Minty Fresh)

Just because Allen Clapp writes unabashedly happy pop tunes doesn't mean he's happy. In fact, it's the subtle contrast between the bouncy music and pensive words that adds dimension to this impressive little collection of 14 colorful pop tunes.

The Orange Peels bring to mind the California-based psychedelic revival of the mid-80s, bands like the Bangles and the Three O'Clock that found inspiration in the sunny pop music of the late 60s, though the quartet's strict rhythms and Clapp's warm vocals bring to mind country punks Rank & File.

As for the tunes, there are at least nine memorable ones here. Three of them—the shimmering "Everybody's Gone," the bright "Something Strange Happens" and the disc's stunning closer, "Love Coming Down"—made the hair on my arms stand on end. Even the genre exercise ("Spaghetti-O Western") is as witty and fun as it thinks it is.

-David Salfino

Purple Ivy Shadows, *No Less the Trees Than the Stars* (Slow River)

Live, Purple Ivy Shadows can either place a toy drumset out front or deliver a straightforward Kris Kristofferson cover. Either way, they attack original numbers like miners salvaging whatever vein their songs tap. Here, Purple Ivy Shadows skates from soaring, sometimes plodding, acoustic REM-rock to interesting forays into one-note, ambient guitar distortion ("Rebuilding the Ancestral Statue"), to near country and western ballads like "No Health." Purple Ivy Shadows' lyrics lean toward stream of consciousness babble, but then so did the Pixies', and Purple Ivy Shadows sometimes hits the nonsense target on tracks like "Dancefloor's Shiny Under Junky" or this catchy nugget from "Sustenance:" "You can be a good athlete and hurt yourself/you can be a good soldier and kill yourself..."

What does it mean? Hell if I know. But I sang along.

-Andy Fenwick

Seely, *Seconds* (Too Pure)

Seely play a tight, arid pop rock. Their main distinctions seem to be the circular lead guitar patterns they pull from their not-quite-predictable chord changes, the breathy, indirect vocals they float over the instruments and maybe the sci-fi synth between-song noodling. When they keep things to at least mid-tempo they're not bad. When they don't, they permit you to notice how thin both the rhythm section and songwriting are.

-David Schweitzer

Slackers, *Redlight* (Hellcat/Epitaph)

This is no ska band. The Slackers might be marketed as such, but I doubt they include themselves among the current wave of mostly uninspired, one-dimensional US ska outfits. Unlike modern ska bands, which draw heavily on punk's interpretation of late-70s/early-80s British ska acts, the Slackers' roots are all over the map. The songs on *Redlight* are still underpinned by familiar Jamaican rhythms, but the blues, jazz, soul and Latin music that color nearly every song give the laid back tracks a distinctly American feel.

The Slackers are more intelligent and soulful than most third wave ska bands,

...continued page 28

the adoration of cranes



I spoke with Allison Shaw, singer, bass player and occasional guitarist of Cranes, on Halloween evening. The day had started gloomy and full of fog, but opened up into a beautiful, brilliant Maryland fall afternoon. It reminded me of Cranes' music: harsh, dark beginnings often leading up to a gorgeous moment of musical and lyrical epiphany. I took time during the day to fully immerse myself in my personal collection of Cranes music, starting with 1991's *Wings of Joy* straight on through 1997's *EP Collection Volumes 1 & 2*. The new release is a collection covering over seven EPs and LPs, including tracks from 1989's impossible-to-find *Self Non Self*, their 1996 mock film score, *The Tragedy of Orestes and Electre*. Two hidden tracks, "Slide," and a live version of perennial crowd favorite "Starblood," round out the two-disc collection.

brandi berry

Allison's brother Jim Shaw is a fellow Crane, playing guitar, bass and keyboards. In 1996 Manu Ross took over Jim's former drum duties. Mark Francombe plays bass, keyboards and guitar. With every band member covering every instrument, they have a versatility that lends well to extremely harsh, sonically experimental music, as well as to delicate, drifting arrangements of classical guitar and keyboards. But when you say "Cranes" to a fan, probably the first thing they'll mention is Allison Shaw's extraordinary voice, lilting, occasionally unintelligible but always dramatic. Allison's voice is a pale flame, tremblingly speaking of darkness, light and love.

Once I got over my initial fear of speaking to her, Allison proved incredibly kind and easy to talk to. I asked what the band was up to in late 1997. "We're really just doing some demos, writing a bit. We played a few dates in Mexico in September. That was really fun. But, really, we're not planning to do any more shows for a while, not until we've done another album."

Cranes has taken on a few eclectic side projects over the last few years, including the strange "film score" (*The Tragedy of Orestes and Electre*) based on a Jean-Paul Sartre novel. Allison said, "Over the last two years, we've gotten more involved in music for films. We're working on a new film project (actually, I just got off the line with a publicist) but that's mostly Jim's work because I've only got to sing on a couple of tracks. I sometimes fiddle about, write some things...but we're holed up a lot, when we're not recording or on tour. Mark is actually living in Norway with his girlfriend these days. So we're sort of having a vacation, because we really don't need to be together. That's just how it is. We just spent five months together. We've been together since 1989, so we do appreciate our space."

What about Manu, I asked? Rumor had it that he had left the band after the '97 tour, but he was present at the shows in Mexico this past September. "Well, he's a bit temperamental..." Allison said. "He wasn't sure what he wanted to do after the tour ended this summer, but he ended up coming to Mexico with us."

I think the addition of a full-time drummer, rather than programmed drum tracks, or Jim switching between drum and guitars, has been good for the band. *Population Four*, which was released in early 1997, took a simpler path than more gothic, dense, earlier works. Even the name of the album reflects a different sense than, albums like *Loved* and *Forever*.

"One of the main things that affected *Population Four* was having Manu join us as a live drummer. We've often used drum machines—although they might not sound like drum machines—on our recordings. Jim just preferred to use sampled drums sometimes. But we went to a much more live feeling (when we recorded *Population Four*), and we decided to use simple things like acoustic and classical guitars as well."

Allison noted that although the band liked the current sound, they were always experimenting. "I couldn't really say what the next record may be like. It could be totally different from our past offerings. What we've been working on (so far) has been

continuing in the acoustic feel, but we're also going in the entirely opposite direction and doing something much more electronic and experimental. We do tend to go to extremes, sometimes."

Direction in the band comes mainly from Jim. Allison said, "Usually, Jim and I work on things in the studio together. We've always had recording equipment in our home. We've often developed things on our own, then brought it to the group before we play it live. I think, having completed that (*Orestes and Electre*), we acted against it. Since *Orestes and Electre* was done so much in a studio atmosphere, *Population Four* was a nice change."

According to the press, Cranes recorded *Population Four* very quickly, in about four weeks. I asked if Allison and the group were pleased with the results.

"Well, it (how we record) changes with every record. On *Population Four*, maybe it was a bit more of a group effort; we all recorded together in one place. *Population Four* is an exception, as we recorded it basically live, without so many studio effects, and with everyone present... It took us longer to write that album than others, maybe. We spent some time in advance getting stuff together, but once we finished a track we recorded it rather quickly."

Since the Cranes' inception in 1989, Jim Shaw has been the group's primary songwriter. Allison said, "Well, if it's an acoustic piece, often we'll start out with just the words, or a few notes. If it's more of a bass and drum piece, we usually start with a rhythm. I can't really say how Jim writes things. He's like a law unto himself. He just kind of disappears for a while, goes a bit odd, and turns up a few days later with some songs."

Allison laughed when I asked if the rumors portraying Jim as a "dark genius" were true: "Jim has his own ideas. He usually comes up with the musical parts of songs, unless someone else comes up with something that he can't deny is good. And then he'll accept it. If he thinks you've done something very good, he'll certainly incorporate it. But if not, it's got to be what he wants."

Despite Jim's representation as the driving creative force in the band, Allison is often portrayed as an "elfin enchantress," the fans' center of attention in the band, the calm in the center of the storm. It's certainly a believable image. Her voice floats out above the swirl of primal drums, arcing violins, and ominous, delicate melodies.

I wondered, how do the other band members react to this image? Allison had already mentioned that she thought the support they got from fans was "really great." But do any of the other band members get jealous of the attention being given to her?

"Oh, that? They (the rest of the band) laugh at me. That kind of thing I do get a bit embarrassed about. But when it's (fans' adoration) someone reacting to a song, be it the lyrics or the music, then we really appreciate it. It's why we carry on."

7" circus

Beatnik Filmstars, *Off-White Noise* EP (Merge)

These song fragments are exhilarating when they end just as they've run out of steam. They're maddening, however, when songs like "Star In Descent" and the sad, lilting "Wrong-Piano" leave you wondering how good they could have been with a little more care. Incredible blasts like "Free Expression Protest Song" and "Trust Me I'm A Doctor" make it all worthwhile, though. (JG)

Be/Non, "Microsurgical Vasectomy Reversal," "Stripping Gears," "Claw Use in the Autumn Years of the Twentieth Century" (Turnbuckle)

You'd think such attention-getting titles would at least hold something sensationalistic, but aside from a slight hint of tune, both sides offer little more comprehensible than trebly blur. Oh, it rocks, it's noisy, there's even a few guitar/studio effects on "Claw Use," but if there's something more specific going on, it got by me. (DS)

The Billy Syndrome, "The Creator Has A Master Plan" b/w "Funny Monks" (Slutfish)

Easily the most annoying single of the year. Think free jazz performed by incontinent hippies, obstreperously skronking guitars, synths and a bloody ugly saxophone. If this is supposed to be a joke, it's not funny, and if it's serious, it's a joke. (JG)

Cherry 2000, "Blood Red," "Ghost" b/w "New Waste Of Time," "Another Ghost" (Catapult)

Arty songwriting and guitar wank was never my bag, but these guys would probably be shunned even at the annual Art Rock/Guitar Wank Festival, which is in Coolville, Ohio, this year, in case you wanted to know. (JG)

Damian Jurado, *Vary* (Tooth & Nail)

Damian Jurado incorporates a lot of noise into shrieking keyboard and electronics and mixes them with vocals that are unmelodic and distant. Emotion is missing from this blue-vinyl disk. The songs are vague and grating. Can't dance to it, can't muse over it, and it's too weak to be called "industrial." (RBF)

Glitterbox, "Jesus Song" b/w "Motor Cycle Song" (Atlantic)

Grunged-up U2: the pained tenor, fragile melodic lines, ruminative guitar shit. The singer's more tolerable making plug-ugly than faking Bono, and the guitar half-disguises its wimpiness when it's amped way up. But production and songs are muddled throughout. And if they were clear it might make things worse. (DS)

Happy Scene, *Take My Teenage Head* (Happy)

There's no way Happy Scene is going to win any battle of the bands.

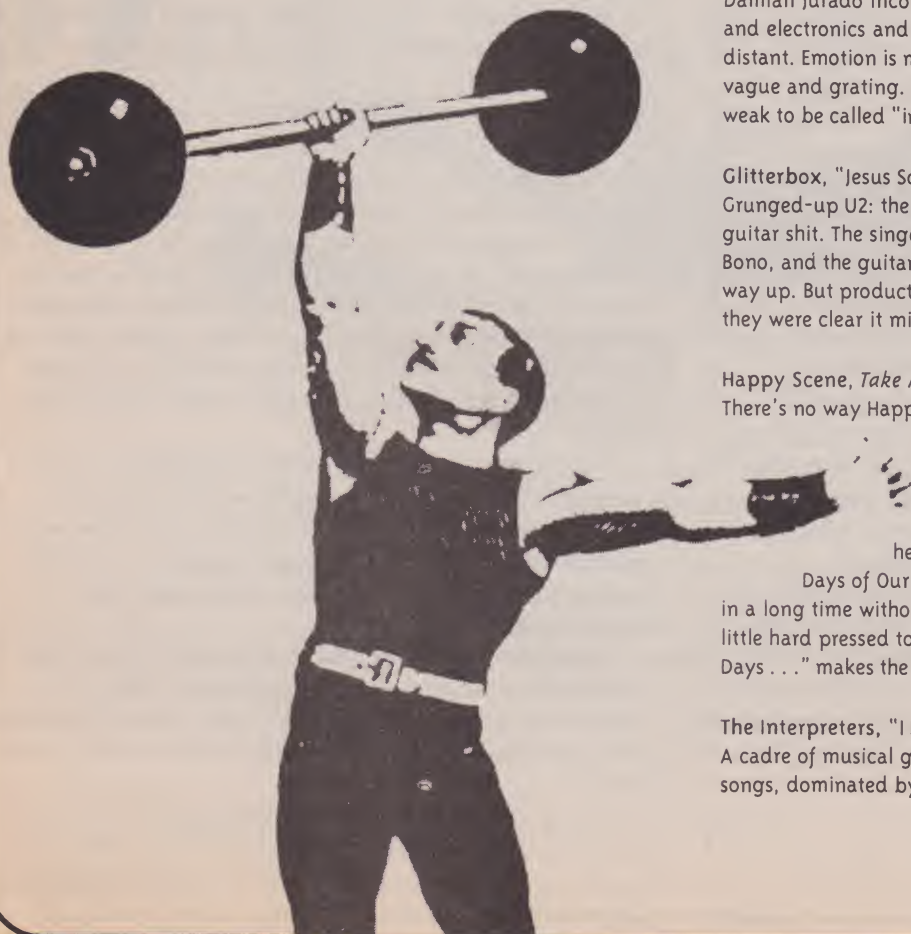
Despite their shortcomings—lead singer can't sing, they can't keep in rhythm with each other, most of the songs are lyrically pretty weak—there's a sense of punk-pop-rock fun

here. Of the six cuts here, one is even good: "Best

Days of Our Lives," the first non-whiny punk song I've heard in a long time without being Pollyanna about it. Although I'd be a little hard pressed to recommend this slab, I would say that "Best Days . . ." makes the record. Lyrics included. (RBF)

The Interpreters, "I Remember" b/w "Dogskin Report" (Volcano)

A cadre of musical ghosts haunts these short, frenetic guitar pop songs, dominated by shadows of the Who and the Jam. That's no



surprise, considering ex-Who and Kinks producer Shel Talmy also manned the knobs for the Interpreters. What is pleasantly surprising is that the Interpreters sound original and derivative at the same time. Keeping pop songs under two minutes doesn't hurt either. (JG)

Seki, "Four Acres (Out of Time)" b/w "Stutter Step," "Lieve" (Cursory Purse)

Sloppy, boring, instrumental dirges belong on B-sides, cousins. The actual B-side of this single is far superior to the plug side, but the spacey, alternarock guitar spiel has been done better as many times as it's been done before. (JG)

Less Than Jake, "Rainbow Connection" b/w "Movin' Right Along" (Liquid Meat)

With absolutely no vital info on either side of this pale blue 45, the 20 second trombone-doused B-side chugs along on a slashin' guitar groove. They spoof the Muppets' Sesame treat "Rainbow Connection" on the A-side; re-inventing it as a gnarly, hardcore/punk concoction. (JF)

No Knife, "Jack Boots" b/w "Communist China" (Time Bomb)

No Knife vigorously bashes out loud garage rock on the slightly ominous "Jack Boots." On the other hand, "Communist China" maintains a more mannered and spare groove. Both songs show off decent harmonies, a plus in the downsized, pre-millennium, indie 45 world. (JF)

Old Man, "Friendly Fire," "Conditions Getting Critical" b/w "The Story of My Life," "Any Other Day" (Valdeez)

Old Man is a bar band, with decent songs, lyrically. The songs are smart and musically OK, but dissonant. They get swallowed in the band's excess noise factor, which is a shame. Lyrics are included, and it's on clear vinyl. (RBF)

Racer 17, *Racer 17* (Bang Pop)

Borrowing from punk, hardcore and grunge, Racer 17 presents a wall of sound that might knock down the walls of Jericho. Sina's growling vocals and guitar work head up the project. Both are sharp as nails, driving the music with the intensity of a gun to the head. Recommended. Comes with neat comic book which includes the lyrics. (RBF)

Reservoir, "American Tune" b/w "Back in N.Y.C." (Zero Hour)

Reservoir produce glossy, appropriately slow and apparently irony-free renditions of early 70s Paul Simon and Genesis. It's clear from these performances Reservoir are not into fun, so if they think this is art they're terribly dull and tweeby, if they're over 16. And if they think it's heading up anyone's charts, they're terribly naive and out of touch, if they're under 50. (DS)

Solar Coaster, "Zero Sum" b/w "Karmageddon" (Turnbuckle)

This group has a bizarre but effective combination of styles. Musically, they sound like a standard wall-of-guitar punk band, while the vocals sound like white bread pop harmonies. I guess that would make Solar Coaster a form of punk-pop, but not like I've heard before. And to be honest with you, I couldn't make out the vocals, so I don't have a clue what they're singing about, but I liked the style. It's great when a group can take some diverse and sometimes opposite components and bring them together so they work. (RBF)

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Arf,
The long-suffering Rex

Thanks, Rex, and be grateful your owner didn't pick Al Frazza to be Genesis' new singer. If I could go back in time, I would become Al Frazza's au pair, and I would shake him to death before he could even think about recording the paragon of lameness that is *A Message To Dehllia* (Big Sleep/Red Iguana).

There's no crappy album that a bad bongo player can't make worse, and Frazza's collection of wimpy, sappy, tuneless folk has bad bongos galore. Where's Preston Epps when you need him? The songs on *Dehlia* feature the apparently talentless Frazza with guitar and spare accompaniment. His high-pitched vocals are hopelessly off-key, like Bob Dylan after he's had his nuts in a vise. Sappy love songs, banal lyrics, musical and vocal incompetence — a near masterpiece of idiocy. Cringe factor: eight. Someone must pay for my pain, and it oughta be Frazza.

I can't prove it, but I think Dowdy Smack's *Aren't You Delicious* (Raven) gave me diarrhea. It could be their maddening resemblance to a host of modern rock douche bags (Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stone Temple Pilots, Bush, Rusted Root). It could be their penchant for lyrical moronisms. ("Pppffththph!" 'Scuse me).

Whatever the reason, Dowdy Smack owes me two rolls of toilet paper, a set of stainless steel butt clamps and a pair of boxer shorts adorned with tiny reproductions of the Shroud of Turin. Skid marks, I can handle, but I draw the line at a viscous film of turd in my shorts. ("Pfloohtpttchockl!" Oof. Sorry.) My intestines rumbled distinctly each time singer ("Ze," as in "ze really bad singer") decided to rap. I can only assume "Ze" means "Queef Chief" in some new hip lingo I'm not cool enough to understand. Or maybe the guy's too dumb to spell his real name. Cringe factor: seven. Ringworm is more fun. ("Bloohtchpfunkl!" Ow, that one hurt. I think it had peanuts.)

There are few things worse than Natalie Merchant. Leprosy is one. I guess you could also include genital leeches (really big ones), being force fed putrefied chimpanzee pus and my seventh grade English teacher (Hi, Mrs. Blumenthal, if you're not dead yet). Add Kieran Kelly's *11 Blues & Greens* (Zoe) to that list.

The album is dedicated to "Regina." If I were her, I'd be pissed, because Kelly sounds like the male Natalie Merchant, but somehow wimpier, more musically inane and quite a bit more annoying. Kelly's soft rock/folk bores are swaddled in insipid sentiments and a style that hasn't school talent show. If a song titled "Sorry For My World" isn't proof enough of Kelly's pukes, the song's first couplet, "Sorry for my world/It doesn't love me," should clue you in. Well, to listen to his world. It's a monumental suckfest.

Cringe factor: six. I hope Regina dumped his sorry ass. If she wants a real date, she can contact me at jimg@oculus.com. Or just look for my phone number on bathroom stalls. It will be preceded by the phrase, "If you want to make it with a dirty, ho' gobblin', nutsmokin', cumjunky bitch, call . . ." What can I say? I'm so loved.

Gang, I sent a very courteous reply to this fine young gentleman. It is listed below.

I'm so glad you enjoy *Oculus*. We love to cultivate readers like yourself and are proud to have them reading our magazine. We also love intelligent, insightful comments like yours. You are a credit to the human race, and we're proud to make you our Reader of the Year for 1997.

You're the best, Dave.

Respectfully,

Jim Glauner

-----Original Message-----

From: David "Boss Beatsville" Vandervort <soulsurfer@oro.net>

To: feedback@oculus.com <feedback@oculus.com>

Date: Friday, December 05, 1997 8:18 AM

Subject: Oculus Magazine Feedback

>Hey Jim Glauner You Suck!

>You say "Todays Surf Records are tomorrows frisbees"

>Man, your a fucking dumb ass. 90's Surf music ain't no trend you dip
>shit.

>Go fuck your self. Man you have no clue about what the fuck your writing

>about. You have got to be the most clueless music reviewer thats ever

>existed. You even listed the record wrong. You listed the Phantom

>Surfers as the Untamed Youth. And you also listed it as Various Artists.

>Man your a fucking fool. Please Die soon

>

>David Vandervort

>

>

>The Dumb Ass Jim Glauner said,

> Various Artists, Untamed Youth: The Great Surf Crash of '97 (Lookout)

> Surf instrumentals make great movie music. They compel you to drive
>90 mph down the highway. Surf guitar's twangy, penetrating spasms often
>make great singles. Listening to 35 minutes of surf guitar, however,

>either induces sleep or schizophrenia. One of the few exceptions is

>Dick Dale, whose stunning command of his instrument and murderous guitar

>attack is rived by few musicians in any rock genre. Surf music's rigid

>strictures seldom allow for a full-length album to sustain any kind of

>momentum. Beside that, the music is somewhat disposable. The profusion

>of independent surf releases today will surely become the frisbees of

>tomorrow, including The Great Surf Crash of '97. At least they have the

>sense to know the surf revival won't last forever, given the music's
>unchanging face.

>

> Don't get me wrong, The Phantom Surfers are
>good at what they do, especially on tracks like "Ants In My Pants," and
>their sense of humor raises the album above the realm of the merely
>listenable. I'll stick it in my car stereo. I'll listen to a few
>singles. I'll even surf to it, goddammit, but I can't sit still for more
>than 10 minutes of twang I've heard before.

>

> -Jim Glauner

> December 1996

Miracle Legion

It would make the perfect Miracle Legion song: Fan idealizes band, gets to know band, makes a video documentary about band, and then Fan realizes he has made a huge mistake. He finds that image, not to mention hypocrisy, is everything in rock and roll. The music has to be good. And sometimes not even that.

Miracle Legion has inspired a cultish following dedicated to not only melodramatic guitar pop, but to the attractive idea of high art produced by four unassuming, regular guys. If you happen to be an initiate of this Cult of Miracle Legion, let me warn you: If you read on, you will meet, as I did, the true-life counterpart of the fan in the aforementioned, otherwise fictional Miracle Legion song. Trust me. He will not make you happy.

In third grade, my lunch monitor, Mrs. Pernasti (that's my spelling), used to make the children repeat her favorite maxim: "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Maybe that's why guitarist Ray Neal wouldn't return my calls, and maybe that's why bassist Dave McCaffrey and drummer Scott Boutier kept silent—they never talk to the press, anyway, and they never have. But all this speculative nasty talk is just that—speculative. Maybe Neal, McCaffrey and Boutier have simply nothing to say.

The latter two continue to stick to their silence in *Miracle Legion: We're Very Close*, a video documentary by Chris Kontoes and Black Coffee Productions. The video, a fan's obvious gush missive, ably transcends its DIY origins with smooth editing and better-than-adequate sound. Kontoes gains enough trust to shrewdly capture the band in the thick of the skull-cracking boredom of the recording studio. Unfortunately, clichés like the requisite highway drive-by shot of farmland, while the music spins, are included. But Kontoes' camera unobtrusively catches some nifty concert footage, along with a priceless fly-on-the-wall pre-concert moment, in which singer Mark Mulcahy self-consciously warms up with the

deeper harmony of a Soundgarden song, only to push his weak, reedy throat on the crowd just moments later.

The straight-on interviews in *We're Very Close* actually capture Miracle Legion in candid moments, if only because McCaffrey and Boutier's silence says more than faking it ever could, and because Mulcahy and Neal aren't too refined at faking it. Neal is sincere, but he seems like he's always holding back the names of that one record exec or those companies (Rough Trade, Morgan Creek) whom he'd love to badmouth. Mulcahy seems generally uncomfortable, like he'd rather be somewhere else, or like he's just too creative for calm, as in the aforementioned warm-up scene.

Neal's sincerity notwithstanding, the viewer gets the feeling that Miracle Legion's image is not authentic. "Some say it's some sort of act," Neal says in *We're Very Close*. Even with the best of intentions, it can all be an act—hell, everything is an act—without the actors knowing so. Why sign to a major label and then reluctantly participate in the production of a video that can only further your image? Such posturing smacks of attempting to retain an "indie" image while licking the company man's ass behind closed doors. Either shun money, or sell your soul without hesitation; either way, you'll look cool. But don't burn the double-ended candle. Don't sign to a major label, like Miracle Legion did, after the basement-distributed *Backyard* sold 20,000 copies. If they wanted only to make music, they could have stayed in that basement and kept their day jobs. Plenty do.

As if they'd learned their lesson after a few years of legal troubles, Neal, in the video, simply says "I hate the record business." Mulcahy says, of record execs, "They love money more than they love music." True enough. It's interesting and relieving to hear a band slag the record business, although they don't name names, which isn't very punk of them. But then Miracle Legion was never punk. Mulcahy, who despite his seeming reticence, always looks like he knows the



the viewer gets the feeling that Miracle Legion's image is not authentic

camera is on him, would only hurt his burgeoning solo career by naming names. Hey, it's his soul. After the trials of mediocrity that he's endured along with Miracle Legion, if it's success Mulcahy wants, there's nothing wrong with a little self-promotion.

When I talked briefly with Mulcahy, he asked me what my specific intentions were, and then stated that he preferred that *Oculus* do a piece on him and his new solo album only, rather than an article on Miracle Legion. I said I'd consult with the editors, and, in the meantime, I suggested he send me a copy of the solo disc immediately, since my deadline was only a week away. Two days later, I left him a message expressing *Oculus*' desire to write about everything: the band, the solo album, the video and Kontoes' comments. To his credit, Mulcahy did call me back, but weeks later, and I still haven't received the solo effort. Lesson: self promotion is okay—if you follow up on it. Otherwise, you risk being seen as a Promise-Breaker (call me about our next rally) and a shit-talker. I suffer from that myself (ask the editors), so it's tough for me to be angry with Mulcahy for promising to deliver his solo album and failing. Who knows what massive laziness or mitigating circumstances he came up against. But other, more powerful people may not be as forgiving as I am.

I never heard from Ray Neal, either, after repeated efforts to contact him where he works. By now, I'm pretty sure the band has broken up, despite what anyone says. Boutier and McCaffrey, at last check, were touring as Frank Black's rhythm section, and quite happy to be doing just that.

Chris Kontoes nearly predicted my entire unfortunate experience attempting to interview Miracle Legion. At first, he was reluctant to slag the band publicly, fearing the ineluctable prospect of Miracle Legion's rabid fan base harassing him over the modem lines, not to mention the death of video sales at a modest profit. But not anymore. Interviewing the garrulous Kontoes is like releasing a starved wolf into a room of legless rabbits. He rips right into Miracle Legion. He hasn't spoken to the band in a year, ever since Mulcahy and he had a breakdown in their agreement over distribution of the video. He laments having had to get a lawyer and damns Mulcahy for answering neither Kontoes' calls nor those of Kontoes' lawyer. Neal doesn't respond either, although Kontoes has nothing but nice words for the guitarist.

It sounds like *We're Very Close* truly did begin as a "fan's love letter," according to Kontoes. "I was a junior in college," he says.

"We didn't know what the hell we were doing." He tells me that the video's stunted length (38 minutes) is due to a sudden lack of money. Miracle Legion never offered to assist monetarily, and understandably so, since Kontoes simply approached them one night, with camera in tow, and was invited backstage. Kontoes, on the other hand, should never have offered Miracle Legion anything in the way of distribution profits of the video, as far as I can tell. But without a share of the profits, why would Miracle Legion care to sell the video? And round and round it goes, like most miscommunication conflicts; I meant this when I said this, you didn't say that when you said that, etc.

Kontoes vehemently dislikes Mulcahy. "We busted our asses for nothing for five years," he says. "Mark never followed up. He screwed us over." He calls Mulcahy "Mr. Tragedy," and then adds, "Mark Mulcahy is the antithesis of everything he tries to be in the documentary." As aggressive as Kontoes can be (e-mail messages and calls asking where this article was), he does follow up on any self-promoting activities, and makes no bones about it. He's profuse in his praise for Black Coffee Productions, with which he's begun working on old footage of burgeoning acts in the early days of Boston's club-alterna-mecca, The Middle East. He even tries to sway any potentially unfavorable opinions I might have of *Miracle Legion: We're Very Close*, and only relents when I assure him I'll try to be fair, whatever my assessment.

Which is this: The video is for rabid fans only, although its technical skill and restraint predict future success for Kontoes. He still finds buyers, although they have begun to annoy him. "Fans are still starving for material," he tells me, and mentions a recent order from Europe for the video. Even he remains a fan. "I still listen to the [Miracle Legion] records," he admits. But in the same way that the band's silence conveys more than words ever could, the video's brevity indicates either Kontoes' disquieting, post-production experience, or at least some sort of schism. All 38 minutes are too well-done to end so soon. If they exist in some parallel universe of possible but unrealized ideas, those never-filmed, last 22 minutes of *Miracle Legion: We're Very Close* would certainly detail Kontoes' discovery that he was only one more fan, in the legions of fans throughout history, who found out that their personal gods were actually their equals.

Not Very Close





Looking back on stacks of vinyl and reams of tape, 40-year-old **Matt Black** said, "We're gonna change our name from Coldcut to Old Cuts." Black met **Jonathan More**, the other half of **Coldcut**, in a record store in Central London in 1987. The two masters of all things musical have since co-produced several albums under their joint alias, starting with the sample-built single "Say Kids, What Time Is It?" from their debut album *What's That Noise?* (Ahead of Our Time). They played an integral role in launching the careers of Yaz and Lisa Stansfield and released groundbreaking remixes such as "The Payback Mix," (James Brown).

Coldcut's most recent joint venture, a three-year work-in-progress, has been the formation of a kind of brotherhood of cool-kid DJs, the Ninjas. This "vaguely democratic" group of all-star scratchers, each with his own distinctive flavor, ranging from old school London Funk to jazz-fused hip-hop to Latin party beats, has once again made Coldcut the hip darlings of a sometimes volatile industry.

The group pseudonym came about in an offbeat way. While touring in Japan, Black and More found a book with "cut-out-and-keep Ninja's." Already world weary veterans of the music business, the idea of hidden identities and secret escape routes in trap door houses appealed to Coldcut's distaste for the industry scramble. The Ninja ethic was quickly adopted.

Ninja Cut-ups: Coldcut

remix the old cuts

"We like to set people up and then get them to do their own stuff," said Black, who, along with More, invited such prodigies as Kid Koala, the duo DJ Food (Patrick Carpenter and Strictly Kev), Funki Porcini, DJ Vadim, Amon Tobin and The Herbaliser to join the Ninjas.

The Ninja Tune Stealth Tour is a phenomenon all its own. The stage was covered with laptops, mixing boards, turntables, a plethora of speakers, amps, musicians and techies each operating in solitary synchronization. On the film screen behind multiple shadows, onlookers watched a barrage of words ("Fuck Dance Let's Art"), images and the quintessential collage of Ninja symbols, which morphed and flashed in time with the DJ's ever-changing beat. DJ Food opened the set with jazz, dub and Latin licks mixed over homegrown breakbeats. Next came Canadian-born Kid Koala, the adorably puckish younger Ninja, who reveled in teasing the crowd with surgically dexterous strokes on his vinyl. In short, he tossed hip-hop beats to knock the cigarette out of your mouth. "Damn, he's not even using headphones," a man next to me mumbled. Founding fathers Coldcut closed the show with a kind of media-meets-the-turntable montage, live Clinton and Reagan footage synched to sampled beats and recorded voice-overs. Their set was more sophisticated, more thought provoking and less heady than the rest of the Ninja tribe's. All the same, the two big brothers took enormous pleasure in watching their favorite youngsters rock the house.

Aside from touring, Coldcut released their new album *Let Us Play* (Ninja Tune) this past August. It's a brilliantly off-center piece of work, with original thought meeting cool-minded beats. The tracks blend funk riffs, hip-hop samples and maniacally tight scratching in a sort of futuristic breakbeat-spiked cocktail. Featured vocalists include ex-Dead Kennedy Jello Biafra, rapper Professor Steinski, poet Salena Saliva and political activist Bogo. The album addresses such themes as Greenpeace ("Atomic Moog 2000"), the tiresome grandstanding of fake celebrities ("Noah's Toilet") and government regulation ("Every Home a Prison"). The single "More Beats + Pieces" is a collage of sorts, "commenting on the current states of DJ and remixing technique." Reggae riffs blend into a recorded version of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, which is hyped up with a kick drum and on-the-one scratching. Classic hip-hop and funk samples are deftly interspersed with original Coldcut beats. And if you're not satisfied with Coldcut's version, there are six "sickening mixes" from the likes of CC, Kid Koala, Q-Bert, John McEntire (Tortoise), T-Power and Strictly Kev (DJ Food).

Historically speaking, America doesn't have a core funk scene, according to Black. "It tends to follow the rock aspect more than anything else." Of his native England, Black said, "funk has never been as popular as house music. House music and rock posturing are big in England. Jungle is suffering a little from overexposure."

As for their own historical contributions, it's been said that Coldcut introduced the shoulder-bopping head-nodding tempo of hip-hop to the global mainstream with their 'remix'—a term they've also been credited with inventing—of Eric B. and Rakim's "Paid In Full." "We'd had three records out by the time we were asked to do ["Paid In Full"]," Black said. "We were in the studio for 36 hours. We just knocked it out. We didn't think they'd like it. We thought they wouldn't get it at all. But they loved it . . . and put it out. We got paid £700. And I'm sure Eric B. and Rakim got 'paid in full.' We did an instrumental version later, called 'Not Paid Enough.'" Black said Eric B. was "pissed off because he was a DJ and we were changing his beats. He described [our remix] as 'girly disco music.' But Rakim, being a vocalist, appreciated the beats."

Despite their popular reputation with other hip-hop artists—Coldcut also did remixes for Queen Latifah, Black Sheep, and Boo Ya Tribe—Black said they have put aside remixing to concentrate on their live shows. "[Remixing] is basically a closed field . . . there's a sort of self-fulfilling industry feel to that scene."

In addition to touring and producing, Coldcut still does a weekly show on London's Kiss FM. "It goes out to a lot of places—Holland, Berlin, Portugal, Radio Nova in Paris, France," Black said. In their five minutes of free time, More and Black arrange mega throw-downs like Mamaloucos, their most recent variety showcase at The Castle in London. In hindsight, Black said Mamaloucos wasn't quite the "mad party" they expected. "People were a bit gob-smacked by the whole thing. But there was a hell of a lot going on with the circus, and all of the DJs and everything. We were possibly a bit too ambitious."

When asked if Coldcut had a following, Black laughed and said, "Possibly. We sell enough records to support ourselves. I've never wanted to be a statue. Only a plinth."

Aniceé Gaddis

Swingin' Get Retarded Neckbreakers

Jim Glauner

It's a long way from playing for a bunch of retarded kids to compelling a crowd to get retarded on the dance floor. Flailing limbs; lips gibbering half-formed song lyrics; awkward, lubberly white-boy dancing; sweat-slicked hair; atavistic grunts — these are the motions of the Solid Gold Dancer spastics at a Swingin' Neckbreakers show. It's hard not to make an ass out of yourself before the Neckbreakers' Big Beat, the punk-driven blend of early British and American rawk, buttressed by the wild, balls-out raunch of early R&B.

Brothers Tom and John Jorgensen really did play to a group of retarded kids in a pre-Neckbreakers lineup, as they continued their onerous search for the perfect bandmate. After a fruitless line of clueless drummers, Tom Jorgensen decided to take matters into his own hands. "I just started playing the drums," he says backstage before a show in Philadelphia, "because we didn't like any of the drummers coming through."

From the start, the Jorgensens wanted to make danceable rock 'n' roll, songs with a vicious, obvious beat. "In the beginning, it had to be easy to learn," Tom Jorgensen says. "It had to be fun for us to play so we weren't bored out of our skulls, and the third thing, it had to be something people could dance to."

In 1992, the brothers found a fitting guitarist in Don "Shaggy" Snook, who played on their first two albums, *Live For Buzz* and *Shake Break*. Live, Shaggy played guitar with Cro-Magnon crudity, a scowl barely visible through a dangling tangle of hair. Then, after two riotous albums and dozens of pounding, perfervid shows, Shaggy was gone. How come?

"We're not gonna talk about that," says John, the singing, bass-playing Jorgensen. So be it.

Jeff Jefferson is the guitarist on the trio's third and best album, *Kick Your Ass*, the record that comes closest to capturing the Neckbreakers' wild live sound. Jefferson says he's known the brothers Jorgensen for about a decade and was a dedicated Neckbreakers fan during the Shaggy era. He was wearing a Hal Blaine T-shirt the night of the Philly show, something you don't see very often. "I haven't grown or gained any weight since I was 17," Jefferson says, "so I still have all my T-shirts."

Jefferson got his unofficial Neckbreaker indoctrination by his second show, opening for Southern Culture on the Skids in Tuscaloosa, Ala. He says it's still his favorite show after a couple of years with the band, after more than a score of boisterous, packed, blaring shows in New York and New Jersey. Why Tuscaloosa? He says, "You never know when your favorite show's gonna be." Jefferson later says he told himself, "This is it, man, this is such a great crowd. I could just die and go to heaven. . . . I've been in other bands, but I've never got anywhere near the crowd reaction I got with the Neckbreakers."

There wasn't much hope for a spastic crowd reaction that night in Philadelphia. About 20 people showed up on the first chill, damp night since spring. Most of them never saw the Neckbreakers before. The usually swingin' South Street, a main Philly drag, was silent and flaccid. After about three songs were received with polite applause, however, three couples began an uncoordinated boogie up front. My peripheral vision caught a formerly unflappable kid trying to sneak a few steps. Dammit, even I started dancing, probably looking like a total dork, flapping like a solitary T-shirt in a washing machine. The whole thing reminded me of a Little Willie John song: "You give me spaaaaaasms, baby!"

The Neckbreakers, as usual, stood relatively still, bashing out raucous, focused hi-test R&B with the fervor of a licentious evangelist. Meanwhile, the sparse crowd grooved, folks here and there flailing and jerking until they were too tired.

Earlier, John Jorgensen talked about how much he loved playing rock 'n' roll and how dedicated he was to the Neckbreakers. Sounding a little trite but true, he says, "Me and my brother have been doing this for a long time, and I guess we'll do this 'til we drop dead." That's fine, as long as they don't kill their audience first, from excessive gettin' down and gettin' retarded. From all those spaaaaaasms, baby.



andy fenwick

bizarre television

Most college students, whether they admit it or not, major in bizarre television. I know I did: *Scola*, *Life Goes On*, Mexican game shows, Shark Week on Discover, *Barnaby Jones*. But with the recent creation of the Center for the Study of Popular Television as part of the SI Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, television might finally receive the sedulous study it requires (deserves? hmmm). On the other hand, if the "center" spews Brobdignagian dissertations essaying the semiotics of Fred Gwynne sitcoms, I'd say Syracuse has gravely erred. With the SI Newhouse School's reputation as one of the premier think tanks of its kind in the United States, one can only hope smarter heads will prevail and produce concrete, hard-core research of at least some sort of social value.

I don't know about you, but I and a few others admit that we no longer picture ourselves in the first person (*picture*, not think—that's ego) when we imagine situations, and we're pretty sure it's because of television. For example, picture yourself skiing—are you looking through your eyes at the tips of your skis, or do you see yourself schussing down the slope as if filmed from the lodge? Of course, this change in perspective hasn't destroyed the imagination. Movies and shows, visually, have only increased in quality. But the increasing inability of film and TV directors and writers to form a personal perspective of imaginary events has only added to the profusion of complete booshit as far as story lines, actors, and apartment sizes. Back in the day, Rhea Perlman, Marilu Henner or LaWanda Page starred in sitcoms because they were simply ... funny. Nowadays, it's all about whether or not the sit-com actress can also function as window dressing. Savvy sit-com hit-makers realize that most viewers, especially superficially-concerned yuppies, enjoy comparing their personal lifestyles to that of a favorite, funny screen personality—as long as said star looks sexy in their trendy haircut. Excepting Rosanne.

As for television destroying literacy, tv has neither the desire nor the ability to defeat the eons-strong power of the written word. Thus far, the networks, unlike publishing houses, have also disguised their fear of the computer threat. But wouldn't you love to see the Nielsen ratings include the internet for one night? Don't be surprised if both cable and the major networks start expanding their websites to interact more fluently with their televised programming.

Like the internet, people around the world switch on the cathode box every night. Television may never replace anything, but it already shares popular importance with any other art form. So the Center for the Study of Popular Television has its work cut out for it: Race relations. How the sitcom has pressured families to solve their problems, with hugs, in 22 minutes and 53 seconds. How the camera alters journalistic information. How television alters self-image, especially for women. And what the hell, if anything, is going on in the minds of people on tv?

Can couch potatoes or tenured drunks answer these questions? Who knows. Television is the largest funhouse mirror ever invented. If tv characters could answer our questions, maybe it would be best to ask them what they borrowed from us real folk so they could be born on screen.

Television and I go way back. Our relationship is, I assure you, not the usual sorry, Gen X nostalgia crap. Or maybe it is. A few years ago, I was watching CNN when the financial report came on, detailing and lamenting the demise of Kenner, the toy company. As the report ended and the commentator summed things up, CNN showed a 20-year-old Play-doh commercial for a toy called Dr. Fill & Drill. In the 'spot,' as they call commercials in the industry, a child places play-doh teeth into the mouth of a plastic head. It took me a few seconds, but I realized that I was watching my six-year-old self.

super sets with picture power

picture me in this



Andy Fenwick

So, as much as I hate television, my childhood career paid for this computer. It pays my rent sometimes. It paid for two degrees that my parents could not afford at all. Luckily, my family invested my money (wisely and, sometimes, not so wisely) and never touched it. I saw most of the United States before I turned 13. I schmoozed with movie stars, assaulted Ricky Shroeder on the set of a board game commercial, and lay on a bed with Kathleen Turner in a hotel room (I was 12—we were practicing lines). I met John Sayles on an audition for a part in *Matewan*, a part that eventually went to Will "Palace Bros" Oldham. Bill Cosby smeared my face with Jello pudding. I own a candid photo of myself and Rutger Hauer, sitting on a curb between scenes, reading (my) issues of *Mad Magazine*. A wonderful smirk slides from Rutger's face. His copy included a spoof of *Blade Runner*.

Of course, there was a down side, but I was lucky enough to have sensible parents who, in turn, kept me sensible. Early on, they figured out the trick to my expanding success: With few exceptions, child actors are only as successful as they are well-behaved. Time is money in the business, and no producer can afford a temperamental, dim-witted kid, and especially not a primadonna, however talented. Sure, talent is important, but then talent, among kids, is ubiquitous.

Anyway, most kids don't need to 'act.' They're cute enough by being themselves. But there is a worn out expression in show-biz: A kid is only as good as his/her director. See Ricky Shroder on this one. What happened to the weeping genius of *The Champ*? There never was a weeping genius. Try salt pellets in the eyes, and then a quickly shot scene. Even grown up actors use salt pellets. I've seen it happen. I did it myself.

There were bad times. Although I never prematurely snorted it, cocaine use was common and unconcealed. I spent amazing amounts of time either alone or with only adults. After goofing off too much during a Lipton Chicken Noodle Soup spot, a 40-year old commercial director demanded a formal apology from me, an eight year old, before he would ever work with me again. Subsequently, any respect for adults went out the window. I forfeited Little League, soccer, birthday parties, and even the passing of loved ones. I could brag like any proud kid and find myself subsequently pounded, or I could find myself beaten up even when I kept to myself.

The jealousy of others surprised me. My current friends are either old homeys who cared less about my success, new friends I have not told, or those who know and have either forgotten or don't care. To this day there are people who knew me then, or find out about it now, who refuse to see me as anything other than the "Chips Ahoy" Kid, or whatever. That sometimes includes my parents. For example, imagine a co-worker finding out about a newspaper article you were in when you were seven, say, dressed up as a chicken for a science project. Something you've tried to forget, obviously. Now imagine that even now, as adults, they call you chicken boy, want to talk about what it was like as a chicken boy and hope you can help them become a chicken boy. As a child, it drove me insane. I wanted to kill these people, but I couldn't, because either I was too small or they were beautiful girls. I can handle it as an adult, but it is annoying. Even from beautiful women (as if they cared). I swear.

When you're a kid, acting, no one thinks to ask you what you want to be when you grow up. They assume you're doing it, and that you will always be doing it. Personally, I was already sure I would be a comic book artist. Showbiz fell into the

Photos by Andy's mom

Andy with Rutger Hauer
Andy and Kathleen Turner
Andy and Powers Boothe
Andy and James Caan

realm of responsibility and work. It was like school. School was easy, at first. But like school, showbiz became tough when genetics took over. Talented or not, once I was no longer whitey's 1980s dream of a mom & apple pie freckle-faced kid, I

decided to quit. I knew, even at 13, that I was not, and would never be, handsome enough, tall enough or acne-free.

No kid views their surroundings with a mature outlook. But showbiz requires a mature outlook, and, unfortunately, denial and immaturity are endemic to those that populate showbiz, either kids, adults or stars. Although my parents allowed me the freedom to quit at any time, I was too young to recognize damage of any kind. Call me alarmist, but when I heard that the director of *Powder* had been allowed to work (on a movie about a pale, hairless, teenage boy with 'special' powers, no less) with children years after he'd been convicted of child molestation, I went on a mental goose chase for past weird situations (I haven't found any, but then my memory is only recently divorced from cannabis). The exploits of fallen child stars like *Diff'rnt Strokes'*

Dana Plato (porn, armed robbery) and Todd Bridges (you name it) are enough to make me want to kiss my parents every day. Mature self-assessment at 13 wasn't the healthiest thing for my self-esteem, but, in the long run, it wasn't as harmful as denial. If someone had mentioned to Plato and Bridges that their success as children did not ensure their success as adults, or as people, at anything, they might not have wiggled out. Only the toughest forms of failure follow easy success.

I've often considered seriously researching the lives of child stars. The contrasts



are as tricky as they are endless—Drew Barrymore finds herself a public drunk at age 12, and Jodie Foster toodles off to happiness Yale and then a widely lauded film career. But Foster doesn't fool me. *Little Man Tate*, a film Foster herself created a few years ago, comes closest to detailing an exceptional child's mix of pride and reluctance than any other film I've seen—except that the child in the movie is an academic prodigy. Yet I find this just a simple and shrewd script change by Foster, lest she be accused of self-pity.

Therein lies the reason for which I will not undertake the study I hope will be

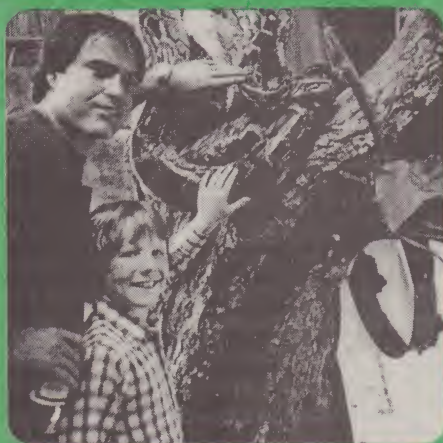
undertaken by the Center for the Study of Television. Without the mask of fiction, or a similar subject, I can hardly avoid the outside accusations of self-indulgence and bias that would most certainly plague such a project. Not to

mention the

harsher voices of my constant suspicion that my concerns are simply a smoke screen for a gargantuan case of self-importance.

So I challenge the Center for the Study of Popular Television. Tell the world not only what the tube does to the viewer, but what the industry, and fame, do to the children (and adults) who experience the industry and fame from the inside. Ask these kids and their grown-up counterparts what they want and wanted to be when they grew up. Ask if anyone ever asked them. Do they feel comfortable in the real world? Can they watch television or movies the same way ever again? Ask them how creepy it feels to see their six-

year old self, 20 years later, on the screen without warning, and then everyone they know says wow, that must be wild. How exciting. You must be proud; shut up already; tell us more.





Hamell on Trial by Fire

by Robert Barry Francos
photos by Matt Garton

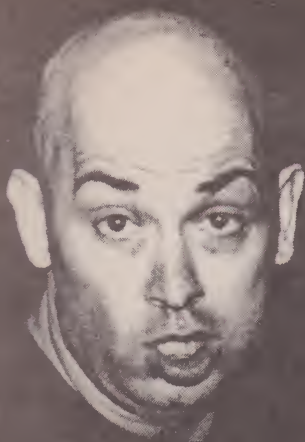
Ed Hamell is a likable guy. He's very energetic and a bit frenetic, has a shaved head, a solid, yet wiry body, a quick wit and a total lack of fear to speak his mind at any time. His act is a powerhouse of autobiography, stunning observation and humor, and his songs tell tales of his varied life, including growing up in Syracuse, N.Y., temporarily settling in Austin, Texas, and crisscrossing the country numerous times. Hamell mixes a hybrid of rock 'n' roll, punk, and singer/songwriter styles; he is alone on stage, playing an acoustic guitar and dealing with personal subjects, usually in story form. And yet, the music is rockin'.

Faced with this contradiction, he replied, "Be an artist. Patti Smith is an artist. I aspire to be of that caliber. What kind of artist? In the medium in which I work: rock 'n' roll. When people say, 'What do you do?' I answer, 'I play solo rock'n'roll.' Period. I mean, Professor Longhair certainly did it. One guy and a piano can be rock 'n' roll. Jerry Lee Lewis can rock this room infinitely more than 9 billion bands. We don't need any more bands."

On Hamell on Trial's second CD, *The Chord Is Mightier Than the Sword* (Mercury), he is accompanied by the standard guitar/bass/drums setup rather than just playing solo, as on his first release, *Big As Life*. Yet, people's misconceptions about Hamell's style come from public expectations about the popular, standardized image of the singer/songwriter form Hamell adapts to his own needs. As always, Hamell faces the issue head on: "The folk community thought I was way too high testosterone, and as for the rock community, I was almost tempted to hire a drummer and bass player to sit on stage and not do anything, just so I could say, 'They're there.' And if you're seeing me, with the harmonic structure of my guitar and the rhythmic of what I'm doing, close your eyes, and I'll bet you'll hear drums and bass."

One of the more telling songs of his life, related through a frenzied, spoken piece, is about physically colliding with John Lennon when Hamell was in his early teens. "When that happened," Hamell explained, "I was young; I didn't understand the mechanism. I really loved and respected him, and he definitely changed my life. I felt really bad that he thought I ran into him. And all my friends were there, and they thought I ran into him, when in reality, I was pushed into him. And for years, I never said anything to anybody about it. I was embarrassed. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that this was a really cool thing that happened. Much better than if I had gotten his autograph. I mean, he told me to fuck off. And quite frankly, so many people now tell me to fuck off that I can honestly say, 'Better men have told me to fuck off than you, pal.'"

Hamell, who grew up in lower-class Syracuse, said his view of the hard factory life drew him to the rock and punk of Jerry Lee Lewis, the Stooges and the Ramones with an open mind, while turning his back on the folk music with which he is associated. "I need rock. I don't listen to any folk music at all, despite that I'm considered a folk guy. I gravitate, invariably, back to all them 70s bands. I listened to the Ramones today. Just a lot of fun. The one thing about the grunge thing is it's aggressive and rockin', and it's very fuckin' serious shit. Punk never really took off in the U.S., because kids in the suburbs—and I lived in the suburbs—they were listening to Skynrd; they were very threatened but didn't know it. 'I'm a little threatened by



this,' they would say, 'I think these guys stink,' and 'They're only playing three chords.' Now when you listen to the Ramones stuff—whether or not they did it instinctively, since I can't imagine DeeDee was there with a drafting pencil or anything—it's brilliant shit."

Hamell showcases his songwriting and performing power on songs like "Red Marty," about the suicide of a crack-head friend, and "The Vines," dealing with the monotony of society-approved manual labor. "There's a lot of guys my age that went into factory work right out of high school. I'm hardly vindictive, because I think it's sad. By the time they're 30, they sort of look at me and say, 'When are you going to get a real job, and when are you gonna quit entertaining this stream.' But then, at the age of 35, they were laid off, and at 35 it's tough to compete, especially if you have no other vocational training." He does admit, however, that "I wish I wrote poppy little rock songs that sold millions of records, and everybody went, 'Oh, that's totally rock'n'roll.' My life would be a lot easier. But organically, what comes out of me are these stories with this bullshit in the background. I know it's a difficult sell. I understand that, so in many respects, my music needs to be seen live."

As with any artist, the gruff sound hides the blue collar, struggling artist insecurities. "When I started writing songs," Hamell admits, "I'm thinking, is this a song? It's more prose with me fuckin' around in the background. And yet, it was what came naturally to me. And my wife, who's a writer, would say to me, 'No, it's a song,' and I respect my wife's opinion 100 percent, but I'm still thinking, 'I don't know.' And the response from the crowd, they would say 'Oh, yeah, it's a song,' and I'd think, 'I don't know.' It took a guy who had written for the *Austin Chronicle* who said "Blood of the Wolf" is the most daring song that an Austin songwriter had written in 10 years,' and I said, 'Right!' Then I started writing."

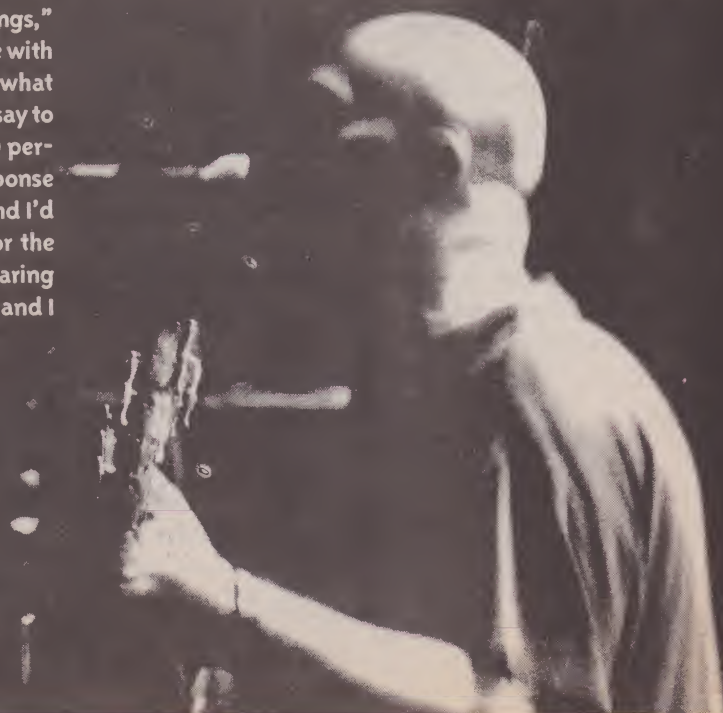


photo and article by brenda uchman

Most of Lisa Jarnot's poems begin and end with a journey. Long drives, bus rides, poems like telegrams—this is the stuff that drives Jarnot's restless writing.

Here, the opening to an early Jarnot book:

i'm not in jail anymore,
i'm on a greyhound to memphis,
The Fall of Orpheus (Shuffaloff Press, 1993)

Some Other Kind of Mission (Burning Deck Press, 1996) is Jarnot's most recent book. She told me the narrative of the prose poems came out of a road trip with friends to North Carolina. Bored for too long in the back seat of the car, her bad mood drove her to write. She didn't stop for four days. That explains the trucks, headlights, empty cities, motels, police activity, crows, radio sky and pitch black buses. Psychological states are in the spotlight. Relationships with seeming lovers surface and recede. The buzzing of information coming out in high frequency gives a clue that the book is about nervous breakdowns as well. Here, a selection:

DIARY OF A ROUGH TRADE ANGEL

chapter one

and then help me because and then and help and then i said i won you said i said i won and we were in a car and countries are toppling i said and style and then and help i said are toppling my style and dictate then and help and then i said i won you said and help and then and car i said and car i said and help i said and then i said a car i said and we were in a car and countries toppling i said are next to my summer address and then i said is next to my style i said are raspberries said and summer addressed and ferris wheel wrench and then

Jarnot's poetry is humorous and exhilarating. What appears as violence turns into a frenzy of comic desperation. She is aware of the effect of her words. Jarnot told me more about the book's construction: "The texture of this book—part of it was recording the process of my brain under very stressed conditions. The syntax builds in this way. It builds in the way like [Robert] Creeley does sometimes in his short fiction. There are moments in the story where the syntax gets so fragmented that you start to get

really tense when you read it, and then you realize it's a reflection of his mental state at that moment. He's doing that purposely, kinda to make you tense. The book was more gut-reaction. I didn't have the distance to be philosophical."

Lisa Jarnot grew up in the outskirts of Buffalo, NY. In the early 80s she studied poetry with Robert Creeley at SUNY Buffalo. In 1994 Jarnot received her MFA at Brown University. Currently she is the editor of the *Poetry Project Newsletter*, she's the Poetry Project Wednesday night series coordinator, an assistant professor of composition and literature at Long Island University and a visiting instructor at the Naropa Institute. *No Trees* and *Troubled Surfer* are xeroxed poetry magazines she edits sporadically. Lastly, she is the singer, guitarist and keyboardist with the band Vole, a folk rock, punk, rap and literary, somewhat political band styled after the Fugs.

Jarnot's poetry consists of dense, telegrammatic utterances which cause the mind to doubt conventional ideas of how consciousness functions. In her poems, the past, present and future are not necessarily separate realms of time and space. Instead they are overlapping entities which Jarnot blends and fuses. Jarnot is able to absorb future and past into the magnetic epicenter of present tense. Spellbinding repetition and insistent revelation tug the reader through Jarnot's landscapes. These descriptive landscapes are actually states of mind. Weaving syntax stuns and disarms the rational mind, allowing memory and dream-like imagery to proliferate. Once the reader is hypnotized, change from within is imminent. Lisa told me, "I think of poetry as a revelation of information, and I think of it as a means of sorting out or accommodating confusions, and I see it as a way of putting something in the world that is useful to other people. 'To ease the pain of living,' as Ginsberg said, and also to record history."

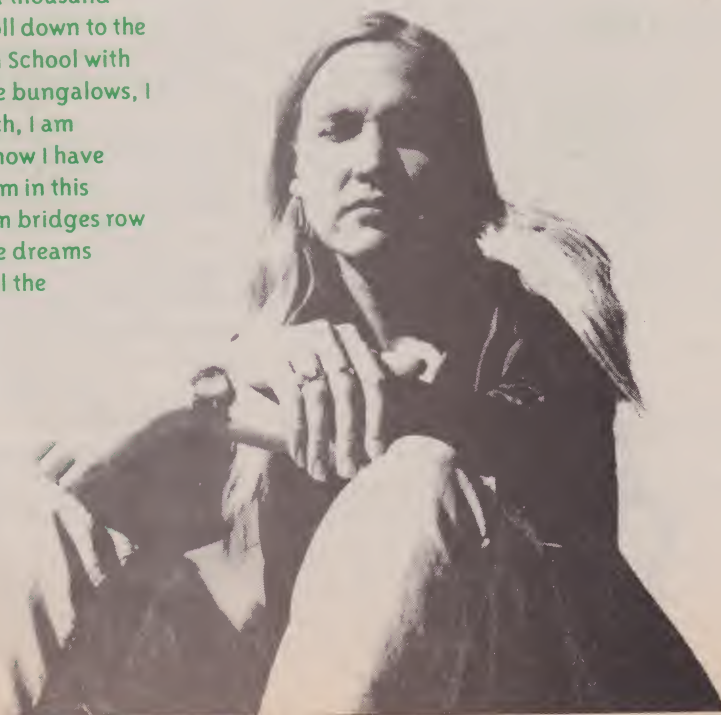
Jarnot considers herself a derivative poet, drawing on other poets' work, their spirit and their methods. Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Bernadette


Mayer and Allen Ginsberg are poets whom Jarnot lists as influential. While all poets could be said to be derivative, it is Duncan's spiritual presence that is particularly evident in Jarnot's work. This fixation on Duncan is manifested in a biography she is writing. "His work is so dense, you can spend years studying it, finding out what it is all about," Jarnot said. "His family participated in a hermetic brotherhood, studied Hebrew, hieroglyphics, numerology, etc. "

Jarnot hopes to complete Duncan's biography within five years. More evidence of her attention to other poets' work and its catalytic effect is present in her book, *Sea Lyrics* (Situations Press, 1996). Jarnot said *Sea Lyrics* was influenced by Ginsberg's poetry, specifically his amphetamine-like sensations. But *Sea Lyrics* is also a retrospective of her life in San Francisco. Jarnot said the "I" in *Sea Lyrics* is the (Walt) Whitman "I" of the multitudes.

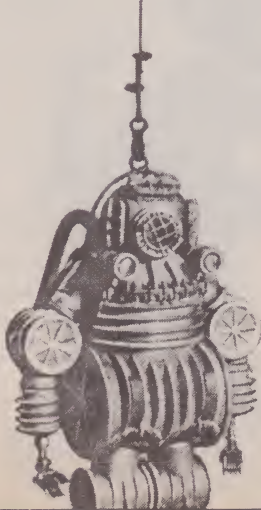





I won't go to the water front anymore, I am basking on a beach far from the army, I am pointing to a thousand speckled birds, I am watching the salads roll down to the shore, I am on the grounds of Mission High School with the murderers, I am near the edge of all the bungalows, I am reaching toward the pineapples to reach, I am dreaming the dreams I hardly know and know I have tattoos, I am in the ambulance at dawn, I am in this town beneath where you have jumped from bridges row by row, from the midtown light, I am in the dreams Lucretius, I have helped you to assemble all the mammals on the lawn.

the journeys of lisa jarnot





DEMO TANK



and self-produced cds reviewed by John
Fortunato, Peter Reitzes and Davis Schweitzer.

Assassin Of Youth, *Live Stock* (201.656.0134)

Having already designed a rustic insignia for its three-song cassette, this lo-fi Jersey quartet warbles through intemperate magma. The ominous, marble mouthed romp "Little Creatures" gets a lift from its bass pumping bottom. "Wanna Live Wanna Die" sets a bass-thickened pulse for toned-down grunge guitar riffs and vagabond-drenched spoken lyrics. (JF)

Blueberrie Spy, (PC Mgt., 212.595.0863)

Here comes some dreamy, heart on the sleeve pop for teenyboppers and soft rock fans alike. Cheery, spritely, and cuddly, Blueberrie Spy share insouciant harmonies and warm melodies, re-creating the splashy innocence that made the Waitresses, the Bangles, the Go-Go's and the Flirts so endearing in the early 80s. "Hey Judas" is a rather snippy affair undercoated with charming melodies; the longing ballad "Everywhere" yearns for acceptance, "Draggin' Fly" borrows the guitar hook from the Classics IV's sinister "Spooky," and the Rickenbacker-laced "Swallowed In the Sun" works as an anthemic closer to this wonderful four song cassette. (JF)

Chancery Rowe, *Where Ever You Go... There You Are* (Mudpie Mgt, 201.361.5591)

The two women in Chancery Rowe appear to owe their strum chord influences to the Indigo Girls and working class passions. I sense sincerity in these songs of yearning. If you can handle the Indigo Girls, you could do much worse than taking a chance on these eight songs. (PR)

!Crepto! (POB 6626, NY NY 10128)

!Crepto! write reasonably well-organized (catchy?) showcases for the guitarist, and the drummer stirs up rhythmic violence. They'd do better if the bassist could help him create a groove with some lift to it, especially if they could explain what the pseudo-demonic vocals are about. The words, which aren't terrible, don't explain much of anything. (DS)

Love Camp 7, *Live in Las Vegas*

(21 Powers St, Brooklyn NY 11211, 718.349.2362)

Somewhat theatrical art rock with part-time garage ambience and comedic tone sounds fine backed with the occasional French horn part, fueled by the myth about how this music is their recently-discovered Sands Hotel tapes. But when their references get too private or pretentious, they're just obscure and self-obsessed. And even then, they're not too bad for art rock. (DS)

Mark Nuzzi, *Steel Spiked Fence*

(POB 7445, North Bergen NJ 07047, 201.868.3545)

For a boy from North Bergen, NJ, this is all right. There is a fine line between Let's Active (Mitch Easter) and most commercial pop, and Mark Nuzzi is sitting on it. I sense that the guitar strums and plucks might even soar with better songwriting. (PR)

One Left, *The Nature Of The Beast* (202.237.2733)

Recalling the haunting, guitar-etched ambiance of Dire Straits, One Left will please brain dead yuppies under the spell of any Triple A dreck radio seems to let in. Pretty harmonies and effortlessly pleasant melodies give each calmly derivative song a wistful splendor. Diligently performed and studio cleansed to perfection, One Left could keep Mark Knopfler's spirit alive—for better or for worse. (JF)

Ornamental, (PC Mgt., 212.595.0863)

These shimmering 22 minutes of embraceable pure pop are handily molded after Everything But The Girl. Angelically demure female vocals elegantly illuminate lushly textured guitar and keyboard flourishes. Softly compelling, sensitive and languid, the rippling "Little Sure Shot" hits emotional depths unsurpassed by the remaining four tracks. Nonetheless, a comforting, compelling mood pervades this release. (JF)

Pop, >>> Airport (POB 207, Red Bank, NJ 07701)

This is West Coast surf punk pop from Red Bank, NJ. Pop are trying for sing-alongs over hardcore stop-and-go songs, bar chord romps and heavily reverbed vocals. The Ramones influence is undeniable. Good production, catchy pretty boy vocals and three short songs. (PR)

Psalm 69, *Happy Hour*

(Stuck Pig Prod., POB 54, Wilmington MA 01887)

Guitar: metallic power chords shifting into Edge-like sonics or punk-like noise for effect. Vocals: overeager early-adult angst shifting into Bono territory (or is that Grace Slick?) when things get more melodramatic. Words: alternate between yearning for, or achieving, escape from this brutal world, and complaining about it. (DS)

Saturn's Child, (212.772.0610)

Victoria Clamp's elegantly soothing, airy cadences swirl above creamy guitar and violin appetizers, serene acoustic lullabies, and quirky, futuristic drum and bass trinkets. On the electronica-informed "Kill You," whispery grievances, scratchy samples, eerie tape loops and interjected laughter drape the inner turmoil surrounding the seductive death wish at the core. But Saturn's Child contrasts so many eclectic post-mod and diva-esque styles that avoiding vacuousness becomes almost impossible. (JF)

Shadrach Scat, *Poor Man's Orchestra* (213.225.7495)

Barely avoiding tacky eccentricities, the wide-eyed affectations by this expansive ensemble effortlessly glide into bright, sunny implosions. Loopy, streamlined guitars power the spirited "Pull A Prince." Upbeat, propulsive bass and jangly guitars enrich "Where To Find Me," the dreamy, imagery-laden "Away From It All" gets embellished by icy cello, and feathery flute soothes the semi-schizoid, guitar stammered "Heiress." By not restricting themselves, the strangely named Shadrach Scat refuses to stay in one place too long. (JF)

Shiner, *Town Liar*

(Beer PHS Productions, POB 54, Wilmington MA 01887)

This quintets' volatile, seemingly X-inspired three song cassette layers Phil De Marco's wavering, tawny, John Doe-ish voice above Exene Cervenka-like backup choral harmonies. "Domestic" counters shotgun guitar riffs with boisterous rhythms. "Someone" is a fairly decent wah wah guitar rocker given a steadfast drum beat. A wankering guitar break lifts "Justice" out of its otherwise mediocre arrangement. Shiner may be derivative, but they rarely disappoint. (JF)

Springwell, *The Llamaland EP*

(Emo Prod., 427 Union St, Brooklyn NY 11231, 718.625.5144)

Springwell's chosen such wishy-washy folk-rock-grunge music, that it's hard to pay enough attention to (or steady the stomach for) the songs. But after some teeth-gritting I've come to the conclusion that Springwell Lally has some soul, or at least smarts. Three of the four songs show he's put some thought, if not feeling, into the otherwise ordinary interpersonal situations he's documented. (DS)

Suran Song In Stag, *Shiny Objects*

(4C Yorkshire Ct, Lakehurst NJ 08733)

Suran Song's flailing voice floats through tempered sonic guitar drifts on these mostly road-themed songs. Captivating melodic refrains, sharp chord progressions and a sinewy arrangement give the opener, "Date," its deliciously caustic flow. And the billowy "Unname Everything" lingers stunningly. But after a while, this disc drags by at a tepid, narcotic pace due to too many aimless, half-baked yawners. (JF)

Tony Travalini & All the Rage, *Offline*

(Peasant Prod., 908 Constance Dr, Wilmington DE 19808)

Travalini's voice is only half attractive when it veers toward Tom Petty's cute drawl rather than Bruce Springsteen's gruff bellow. But Travalini & All the Rage have a way with their slightly new-wavish mainstream rock—solid riffs, some punch, even some good guitar noise a couple of times. If they'd done this in 1980, they might have had a shot at the big time. Then again, they might have gotten lost amid dozens with the same idea and same partial grasp on songwriting, which is usually all that can make mainstream rock go. (DS)

Wilma, (212.541.7097)

Swept away by dynamic arrangements, Amy Elizabeth Marshall's buttery, nearly childlike voice rubs against melodic guitars, playful bass and shaking tambourines on this deceptively pessimistic, seven-song, 22 minute EP. Exquisite B-52's simplicity ultimately gets pushed aside for the funky soulfulness of "Killjoy," the party anthem "It's Never Too Late" and the complete stylistic departure, "If You Got The Booty, You Got The Power." Devoid of Marshall's purr, "Booty" assimilates P-Funk grit to no detriment. (JF)



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primarily because they're not wedded to a narrow definition of what the music should be. They've created party music that doesn't sound forced, songs with Jamaican roots that sound more at home in Harlem and a style that outclasses nearly every modern American ska band.

-Jim Glauner

The Smugglers, *Buddy Holly Convention* EP (Lookout!/Mini)

These loony Canadians combine punk, pop and garage into an engaging, fun album. All six "official" songs are quite funny and a tad manic. Starting strong with "Melee in Madrid" and ending strong with a pseudo-ballad, the bizarrely titled "I Love Spoons," these guys rock while remaining accessible to varied tastes. Also notable is the "hidden" 15-minute track seven which is like a modern "Revolution No. 9": part soap opera, part noise, part spoof and all fun.

-Robert Barry Francos

Townies, Pluperfect/The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Little Voice)

I hate it when a lame guitarist who think he's the next big singer/songwriter sits down with a bunch of soft ballads and some other guys playing programmable synthesizers/beat boxes and warbles into a recorder. I wouldn't mind if they kept it to themselves or close personal friends, but how am I supposed to function when I listen to really bad synth beats played over a guitar and a voice that seems to be imitating an FM disc jockey from the 70s? I really couldn't tell you what the songs on this CD are about, because each tune wiped out any memory of the previous one, and when I took the CD out, I couldn't even remember the last one. We're talking lame, jack.

-Robert Barry Francos

Ultra Breakfast, *Ice Cream Tricycle* (Catapult)

Ice Cream Tricycle is quite possibly the most charming thing I've heard since the lead singer of Marilyn Manson threatened to commit suicide. The album covers every track with the same tongue-in-cheek, unpretentious intensity, whether they're singing the praises of a hair dryer or exposing a latent fear that a significant other is the Unabomber.

Each song brings with it original, accessible lyrics and music to match. Maybe Ultra Breakfast's most endearing quality is

their wide scope of influences, including guitar noise, indie pop, pure punk and jangly country each of which they breeze through effortlessly.

-Maria Raha

Varnaline, *A Shot and a Beer* (Zero Hour)
Snailcore, or slowrock, or whatever it will be called, suffers from the same malaise as ska: too many cooks spoiling the style. Changing chords with the feistiness of a bulldozer, Varnaline could test the patience of a buried fossil. In the words of drama coaches around the world: where's the tension? What's your motivation? Don't get me wrong—these acoustic melodies often unfold quite nicely, and if they haven't already, Varnaline could cut a nifty country record. For now, their neurasthenic ditties could drop a meth addict.

-Andy Fenwick

Various, *The Corners of the Mouth* (Bubblecore)

The liner notes' contention that disease is one or more of your body's organs falling "out of tune" is either gross oversimplification or horrendous bullshit, but that's not to say that the right sounds can't have at least as many healing properties as fresh air, the right percentage of humidity, or sunshine on my properly sunscreened shoulder. One might ask why these sounds need come from a synthesizer, or any musical instrument, but some of this compilation—a benefit for a healing-music organization—suggests that it can.

Mouse On Mars's bleeps and gurgles, Seefeel's nine minutes of spacey swirls over basic drum-and-bass, Moby/Voodoo Child's very mild abrasives, and the spooky whistles and vibrations from AUBE's glow-lamp, whatever that is, are calming and very moderately enriching. They engage the ears without insulting or boring the rest of the brain. But about the only healthful benefit the remaining seven cuts might provide is a good night's sleep. Admittedly, some music provides less even than that—the arrhythmic squawks provided here by E.A.R., for example—but usually I can sleep without turning on the stereo.

-David Schweitzer

Various, *Lounge-A-Palooza* (Hollywood)

They say that everything that can be done has been done, but I don't think the person who coined that adage ever considered the

prospect of Las Vegas staples Steve & Eydie doing an incredibly serious, totally deathly-sounding cover of Soundgarden's staple "Black Hole Sun." You think I'm kidding?

Lounge-a-palooza combines two recent musical trends, Lollapalooza (i.e., "alternative" music) and space age bachelor pad music, with enough retro hipness for *Details* magazine to cream their Dolce and Gabbana jeans over. But I can't lie—tracks like Combustible Edison with Esquivel on "Miniskirt" and Pizzicato Five's bouncy, swinging cover of the classic "Girl from Ipanema" had me bopping in my seat for hours. Other tracks, such as Ben Folds Five covering the Flaming Lips' "She Don't Use Jelly" and Polly Jean Harvey's schmaltzy, melodramatic rendition of "Zaz Turned Blue" made me cringe with shame for the artists involved. However, Glenn Campbell and Michelle Shocked ("Wichita Lineman," a favorite of mine as a child), and Jimmy Scott and Flea singing "Love Will Keep Us Together," show divine inspiration that only a true music lover could appreciate.

The one thing I dislike most about big-label compilations is their tendency to showcase "young" talent (i.e., still riding the tentative success of a first album, such as Poe and the Fun Loving Criminals here) which make repeated listenings a drag. Here, however, the balance of old and new is maintained by a high and campy hand, waving about with a full martini. Pick this one up, but be sure to grab the cocktail onions while you're at it.

-brandi berry

Various, NONSCD50 (North Of No South) Sweden, unfortunately, is usually remembered for snow, Abba, Volvos and those friggin' meatballs. That's probably why so few have noticed what must be an amazing music scene, judging from this North Of No South Records compilation. Cheesy techno, guitar pop, lo-fi rock, airy avant-noisefests and some odd folk music hybrid take turns in the spotlight, each with exuberance and panache.

Fivel takes an excellent swipe at the Pixies on "Howlin'," and Ray Wonder makes the most beautiful pop so far this year on "General Hugging Center." And yeah, it's actually about a place where you can go and get hugs for free, or "payment not to be rendered," as they put it. Doktor Kosmos' "Do You Remember?" is a maddening repetition of the title, backed by what sounds like a toy synthesizer. Each time

that Scandanavian bastard says, "Do You Remember?" I wanna strangle him, but by the end of the song his endearing idiocy wins me over. His "Mobbaren" is even better, and this time, he doesn't sing the song's title 25 times in a row. Carpet People supply two excellent mopey tunes from the Sebadoh school of rock. Honeymoons do a worthwhile Teenage Fanclub imitation on "My Honey You," and Colonel Blimp wins the award for the best song title with the crazed, Zappa-esque "As Soon As Sooner Comes We Go Further Finding Ourselves."

Cloudberry Jam perform credible, jazzy pop on "Elevator" and "Come Back And Stay," and Trio Ligo's "Moona" is a cool, tough cross between country and an Irish reel, sung effectively in Swedish. Komeda and Pinko Pinko acquit themselves well, performing breezy pop and angular, jerky rock, respectively. The only uninteresting group on the collection is Daybehavior, with two slick, ordinary pop tracks that seem out of place on an album rife with creativity, goofy charm and special Swedish style.

-Jim Glauner

Wheat, Wheat (Sugar Free)

Wheat is quintessential 90s radio music—the vocals are always on key and never strained. The lyrics are evocative, and the musical bridges include layers of keyboards and effects in all the suitable places. They seem to be one of those bands that your hepcat eighth grade band teacher might cite as an example of good, modern music.

Unfortunately, all that supposed perfection maintains a level of boredom which borders on flatlining. Just when you think you've been granted asylum with "Leslie West," a country-influenced acoustic number, the band breaks into a lengthy guitar ballad suitable for one of K-Tel's lovesong compilations.

The band seems to be content with

straitjacketing themselves into formulas: an acoustic introduction, a couple of verses that end way too soon, maybe some quiet feedback to introduce the instrumental which will fill up the remaining five or six minutes of an eight minute song. Now, don't get me wrong—apathy, ethereal guitars and a bit of experimental noise can be quite attractive elements. As Wheat presents them here, however, their usual appeal is obscured by agonizing instrumentals that would give a partially catatonic drunk attention deficit disorder.

-Maria Raha

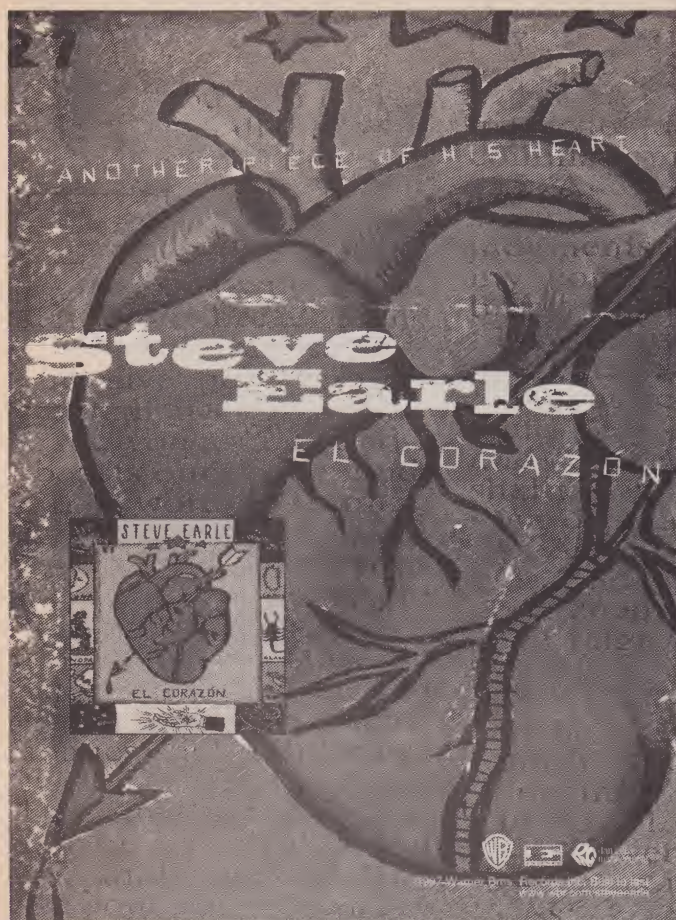
William Carlos Williams, White Women (Shoe String/Ichiban)

William Carlos Williams are a predominantly instrumental group that suggests a slightly heavier *Can of Bees*-era Soft Boys with some avant-jazz leanings. The best tracks, such as "The Firmest Pillar of Good Government" [sic], work up a decent head of steam at the expense of instrumental proficiency, melting down into fairly experimental territory.

Even at their weirdest, though, WCW are rooted firmly on the rock side of the fence. Even Rob Mallard's saxophone sound owes more to Daniel Ash than, say, Albert Ayler. "Town & Country Seeds" and a few other tracks churn up a kind of clunky avant-hillbilly pots and pans thing (Eugene Chadbourne makes a brief cameo, if that'll help explain just what the hell I'm talking about). "And You're Stuck in Traffic While Your Piano's Home Having Cocktails With the Termites" is a bit of faux-jazz that may also be my nominee for song title of the year. All in all, with a little more discipline, these guys could really be going places. They probably shouldn't let their friends sing, though.

-David Reitzes

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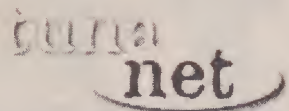
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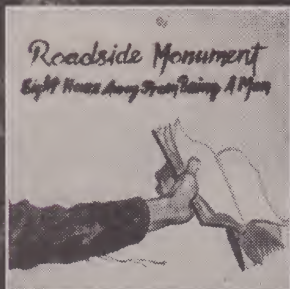


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